

The past is written

It cannot be altered

It is the future you seek

To find the lost

A gift is given

But beware

To hear, you must listen

# Chapter One



In a small, musty thrift shop, a barrel-chested man meandered along a narrow aisle. Amidst the clutter of clothing, knickknacks, kitchen utensils, dishes, jewelry, and other junk piled on the tables, he searched for his bait. Tucked under his arm were two he'd already found.

Working his way to the back of the store, he rounded the end of an aisle and walked into an unexpected blast of freezing air. Startled, he stopped. While the goosebumps still lingered, the cold air was gone. With a shake of his shoulders, he chalked it up to problems with the old building and turned his attention back to the tables in front of him. Hell, nothing but baby clothes, not a single doll among them, he thought, before turning to head to the checkout counter.

A flash of light on a table pushed into the corner caught his eye. Curious, he stepped toward it and spotted a small doll propped against a stack of baby clothes. How had he missed seeing it?

The doll was old, maybe too old for what he needed. The face was dirty, and the dress tattered and stained. Long pigtails hung over the doll's shoulders. About to pass it up, he changed his mind when he saw the price on the tag tied around the wrist. For twenty-five cents, he'd find a use for it.

At the front counter, he laid the dolls next to the cash register.

"Someone is in for a nice surprise," the clerk said.

The man mumbled, "Yeah, got granddaughters." The lie, one he'd used before, easily rolled off his tongue.

The clerk rang up the first two dolls, then picked up the old one. With a puzzled look, she asked, "Where did you find this one?"

"At a table in the back."

She turned it over, then fingered the price tag.

Impatient to get out of the store, he asked, "Is there a problem?"

"Uh ... no. I just don't remember this doll, or pricing one this low." With a shrug, she rang it up.

As he hurried out the door, swinging the plastic bag filled with dolls, she watched with a baffled expression. Then another customer stepped up to the register, and she forgot about the odd sale.

## A few days later

His body hummed with anticipation as he gazed at the deserted street. Since he'd taken the time to study the small, residential neighborhood, he didn't expect any screwups. He knew who came and went—and when. During one of his nightly visits, he'd even timed a dry run. Before anyone noticed, he'd be long gone. Still, he played it safe and circled the block one more time before backing into the driveway of a vacant house. After opening the passenger door, he made sure his thickset body blocked the view of anyone driving by.

From a plastic bag lying on the front seat, he removed a bottle and rag. Unscrewing the cap, he ignored the sweet odor that floated in the air as he quickly doused the rag with the colorless liquid and shoved it into his jacket pocket.

After recapping the bottle, he wiped his wet hand across his thigh, then picked up a second bag. Unpending it, a doll dropped onto the seat. As he reached for it, the sound of a child's laughter echoed. As he stepped back to look toward the sound, an unexpected sense of danger sparked a prickle of chills. He glanced along the street and houses. Even though he was unable to account for the odd feeling, it tugged at him. When he shifted his gaze to the girl in the backyard, he dismissed it as nothing more than his anxiety over grabbing a kid this close to home. Despite his protests, he had to admit finding her was a stroke of luck.

Her arms filled with dolls, the pink bows tied to her shoes, and nut-brown curls bounced in rhythm as she trotted across the yard.

Oblivious to the man who watched, she laid the dolls on the small table near the patio. In a high-pitched voice, she said, "Betsy, you get to sit across from me," and propped a doll on the chair. With the second one in her hands, she studied the remaining chairs, then said, "Emily, you sit here." Picking up the last one, she ran her hand over the doll's hair with a soothing motion. "Daisy, are you feeling better?" she asked before setting the doll on the chair.

Still talking, she reached into the box next to the table and grabbed a plate and cup. After placing a set in front of each doll, she said, "I'll be right back. Sarah wants her ride." Hopping out of the chair, she ran toward a tricycle where another doll sat in the small basket hooked to the handlebar.

*Hell, what was he doing, just standing here?* If the kid followed her normal routine, she'd only make a couple of turns in the yard. If he didn't get to the gate on the other side of the house in time, he was screwed and would have to try another day.

He reached inside the truck, grabbed the doll, and stuffed it under his coat. As he hurried along the sidewalk, he kept an eye on her. After adjusting the doll in the basket, she straddled the tricycle and began to pedal. He didn't have a choice. He ran. By the time he reached the gate, his lungs heaved, and sweat beaded on his forehead.

With the back of his hand, he pushed up the latch, then shoved the gate open. Reaching under his coat, his hand fisted around the doll's soft body. As she came around the corner of the house,

he held it up. In a hushed tone, he said, "Mandy. Look at what I found."

The pedals stopped. With a wide-eyed stare, the child studied him before gazing at the doll.

"Is this pretty doll yours?" He waved it in front of him. His other hand clenched the rag inside his pocket.

Curls jiggled as she shook her head no.

"Would you like to hold her?"

Her face lit up. She slid off the tricycle. "Sarah, you wait here. I'll be right back." After a quick pat on the doll's head, Mandy took a few steps toward him, then stopped.

He shook the doll again. The long pigtails brushed his hand. "She's so lonely and needs a friend."

Her eyes narrowed in disapproval. "You let her get dirty."

"Oh, no, I didn't. Someone else did. That's why I want to give her to you. I bet you would take really good care of her."

She wasn't coming any closer. Had he made a mistake in using the old doll? Kids these days only wanted new stuff. The beads of sweat trickled down the side of his face. The time was passing; too much time. Since she'd seen him, he couldn't stop now.

As he took a step toward her, she walked up and extended her arms to reach for the doll. He dropped it and grabbed her. Before she could cry out, he slapped the rag over her mouth and nose. Mandy's hands beat against his, then slowly weakened as the drug took effect.

He stuck the rag in his pocket. With an arm wrapped around her limp body, he picked up the doll, gathered the child in his arms, and ran to his truck. When he threw her on the backseat, he realized the doll was gone.

After tossing a blanket over Mandy's body, he stepped around the front of the truck, looking back along the street. "Hell! Where is it?" he muttered. It was probably lying by the gate or in front of the house. Should he go back?

The fearful cries of a woman decided the matter. He had to leave. Even though he was irked about losing it, he wasn't overly concerned as he slid behind the wheel. After all, the damn thing only cost him a quarter. Since no one could link the doll to him, it wasn't important. Besides, he had other dolls.

The truck rolled out of the driveway, and he slowly drove away.